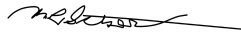


Koininia

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Master of Fine Arts

Herron School of Art and Design
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Associate Professor, Andrew Winship
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Accepted: May 11, 2020



Professor Greg Hull

Interim Dean of Herron School of Art and Design

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Date

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Sarah C. Strong

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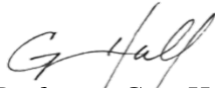
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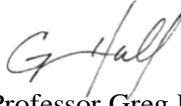


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To be alive is to be in relationship. To be human is to seek connection.

Through our senses we connect to one another, to the world around us and to the spirit of life itself. Our human experience is an opportunity for sacred relationship. I have found this relationship through the experience and transformation of plant life. A plants life cycle exemplifies the life~death~rebirth process that is our human experience. With intention, I harvest and transform plant fibers, molding them into handmade paper forms. Papermaking is a true alchemical transformation of natural materials utilizing earth, air, fire, and water. Being enveloped in nature provides me an opportunity for powerful reflection, grounding, and inspiration. Communicating and collaborating with the earth I am reminded to breathe more slowly and deeply. I watch the leaves moving with the wind. I see the birds flocking, moving together in unison. I come upon a plethora of examples of the harmony and tension we navigate in our human lives. *Koininia* bears witness to the natural world as a gateway to sacred relationship.

“We often forget that WE ARE NATURE.

Nature is not something separate from us. So, when we say that we have lost our connection to nature, we’ve lost our connection to ourselves.”

Andy Goldsworthy

As a young child I began to observe and manipulate natural materials as a way of understanding the world around me. I craved connection to life force energy. In the forest or garden, I found solace and comfort from the turmoil in my home. I gather fibers

for presence and connection, for papermaking, for transformation. I am transforming myself. I am more than the sum of my parts. My creative expressions are alive and demand to be heard, seen, to be part of their own manifestation. There is a reckoning, of sorts, between Earth's materials and me.

Koininia, the title of my thesis work, is an action word describing the practice of a symbiotic relationship with the sacred through communion with others. My relationship to the natural world, to my father and to the Divine developed simultaneously at a very early age. I felt safe and wholly alive in our small wilderness. My father taught me that the beauty and power of the Earth is a gift of God. When the birds chirped about the rains coming or the sun shining I would be overcome with glee. I was always joyful and comfortable out of doors, with the natural world, with fire, water, wind, and dirt.



Figure A

themselves. By spending time with them I learn to understand their life and language.

My personal experience with the natural world is sacred relationship manifest. At times I transform my materials in a way to call attention to their natural structure, or to the power of the multiple, sometimes to the form of the very thing itself. I use the character of the fibers to create paper that has a relatable and distinguishable result. I do this by building a relationship with the plants

Figure A is such an example. Here, I have wrapped wet flax paper around the prickly form of a Teasel seedpod; addressing the inner and outer structure of the form. The way the shrinking fibers hug tightly around the spikes, bending them slightly, examples the dance of compromise, flexibility and consideration of one another. By wrapping a soft yet strong piece of paper around a sturdy and prickly form I offer protection to both the internal and external structure. The blossom has a hint of color calling to mind the fresh soft beauty of life. The thread speaks of human connection and hand work, of the weaving of our existence. There is evidence of a life lived and seeds for renewal.

My art making practice is faith in action: faith that reciprocal relationships are the purpose of life. I witness plants living their life. They know what they are supposed to do. These plants teach me how to be present. They teach me about choice. They teach me about determination and perseverance.

Nature inspires me to create. Ideas in the form of visions or images of a piece of art sometimes come first, thus being inspired, I set



Figure B

out to make the thing of my vision. Yet other times I am overcome with a need to express a feeling or idea.

In Figure B, we see a landscape image created two dimensionally entirely from natural plant materials. The implied movement in this image is created by the placement of curved fibers in a light atmospheric surrounding juxtaposed to the darkness and density of the lower part of the image. This offers a feeling of sturdiness, grounding and stability in the lower portion, while the thinner and sparse fibers springing up are moving about in the wind. This piece discusses my need for earth and stability in order to embrace the feeling of moving about freely.

In the book, *Ancient Art & Ritual*, Jane Harrison suggests that both art and religion come from an unexpressed piling up of emotion, information, or inspiration. This energy, for whatever reason, has not yet found a release in practical action. This delay allows for abstraction, she explains, often resulting in the creation of a sacred act or ritual or in the making of an object to be offered in exchange for water, birth, or food. As human life has progressed, in many places, the need for survival, food, and creating future generations comes much easier, providing even more time for these abstractions to occur. For example, we no longer dance, perform ritual acts, or offer sacrifices to the gods for rain or sun. Yet we continue to create! Harrison claims all creative output is a sort of combustion. Art making, whether object, writing or performance is truly thus! It is a bursting forth of the synthesis of experiences, thoughts, inspiration, research, images, and the natural world.

Mercea Eliade agrees, saying, “every creation is a divine work and hence an irruption of the sacred, it at the same time represents an irruption of creative energy into

the world. Every creation springs forth from an abundance. The gods create out of an excess of power, an overflow of energy. Creation is accomplished by a surplus of ontological substance. This is why the myth, which narrates this sacred ontophany, this victorious manifestation of a plentitude of being, becomes the paradigmatic model for all human activities.”

According to both Eliade and Harrison all creation is an overflowing of energy. This overflow results in creative action. Plato said all art is imitation but Harrison argues it is an embodying of the essence of the thing itself, a possession, a taking on of the spirit of the thing, not a mere imitation. To imitate simply means to act like or create the likeness of a thing. I use natural materials in order to make you think of the natural world. In order to remind you, call attention to, to stir curiosity about nature in you.

Plato accused art of being dangerous. He suggested it is closer to illusion than it is to the truth. Plato saw art as an imitation of an idea that already belonged to God. Since God has first perceived all things, ‘types’ as Plato called them, then the idea in man was the first imitation and creating a thing based on the idea was the imitation of the imitation, thus twice removed from the true and original ‘thing’. Perhaps we are to become the thing itself in order to call it forth. Aristotle, a student of Plato, responded thus: art is not a mere imitation but rather a re-presentation of a thing with the goal of exposing the archetypal or universal knowledge of it. These ideas later became known as Mimesis and is today one of the theories of Art.

Using Figure C to discuss Plato’s idea of imitation it would be argued that in using the plant that God first conceived, the very plant itself is already an imitation. Since I have taken it out of the earth, altered, and manipulated its original form to share an



experience, it would then be more accurate to use Aristotle's position of re-presentation.

There is some truth in this; I am in fact re-presenting the plant to the audience in the gallery. But what is my intention? If my intention were to merely display the plant itself then Plato would be accurate. If my intention were to represent the universal knowledge or the archetype 'field plant', or even to simply show the beauty of the plant then Aristotle's rebuttal could be sufficient. Truly though, my intention is to show the beauty of the plant, the archetype of plant life, to call forth one's prior physiological experience with this plant, or any plants, or rather the living energy in order for the experience of the plant to be recalled. The paper wrapping around and holding all the plants together examples our human need of being held in order to feel secure. To need roots, to need ground. This is a full embodiment of our senses and their affects. Because we are embodied experience, our memories have the power to activate the senses, which call to

mind, body, and spirit the inner action that took place within us when first we encountered these gifts of Mother Nature.



This work was presented in a gallery with very high ceilings. As we walk around the wall we see mounted at eye level three masses of plant life, in a row with equal distance between them. These are real plants, once alive, now dried and positioned with direct and angular lighting casting shadows of the multiples of plant stems, blossoms turned to

seedpods upon the white gallery walls. These shadows and the plants themselves create multiple layers of the plant's image. Some viewers may recognize the plant as Queen Anne's Lace, some may only recognize it as a piece of the natural world, but I believe most will notice they are dried. They have retained much of their color because I harvested these particular plants at different times in order to keep their color and not change to the dull brown all plant life eventually fades to when left alone.



Individual solid units of plants are hanging on the wall with space around and behind them, with shadows being cast above and behind, to the right and left, directly at eye level. One could reach out and touch the plants or lean in and smell them with ease. Even if one has no particular prior knowledge or experience of Queen Anne's Lace, they have surely been affected by natural wonders, by plants, by the aliveness of the

plant kingdom. Whatever their previous experience, it will be recalled not only in mind, but in body and spirit as well. I pose my works are not imitation, nor a representation of nature, but rather they reflect one's prior embodied experience.

One of the most fascinating aspects of being human is our complex relationship with our senses. These three groupings of plant life, in this case Queen Anne's Lace, bear witness to a natural world: a world uninterrupted by humans. A wild and changing place subjected to the seasons as all of humanity once was. When people look at something that was once alive, our mind immediately calls forth the living version. Again, we have seedpods holding the life force energy needed for rebirth. Like death, rebirth is an example of transformation.

Whether or not one is cognitively aware of the presence of the life cycle it has been called forth. However subtly, the cycle is present in their consciousness. Their sensory rich memory has been activated. Phenomenology is the philosophical study of experience and the notion that what we perceive as reality is dependent upon our consciousness. Our projections onto objects or 'phenomena' prevent us from truly experiencing the thing itself. We are in fact, experiencing our consciousness of the thing, which is limited by our knowledge and understanding. According to phenomenology we simply cannot override our brain's training of identification awareness (sensory perception, thoughts, experiences, ideas, emotions) and the very way our bodies function, both the limitations and the outstanding advances create our embodied experience in every aspect of our lives.

Dyani White Hawk Polk, a contemporary Native American artist, spoke at the Eiteljorg museum recently about the value of art being allowed to exist within the mental space of pre-cognition. Pre-cognition being the mental space where we actually first encounter an object or sound or anything before our information kicks in. White Polk declares beauty is still a viable reason for making art because beauty transports us away from the stresses of the world we have created, perhaps to an earlier time, of simpler living, when art was made both to please and to function. White Hawk Polk speaks about the indigenous ways of her tribe and how the families passed the knowledge from generation to generation. They taught the younger generations how to make the dyes, how to use the fibers, the skills with which to work the earth gifted materials into beautiful and functional art objects.



Figure D

I embrace the state of pre-cognition and the decentering of human knowledge. I believe it is valuable to the human psyche to relearn how to stay present in the space of observation and feelings, and learning again to fully embody beauty for the pleasure of beauty itself. This beauty and joy of creation returns us to the path of divine relationship. Exchange for the purpose of awareness or connection is achieved not through the mere sharing of information, or imitation or even representation, but through engagement of the senses.

One major thing in common among indigenous cultures; something I believe we, in the modern and developed world have lost; is our symbiotic relationship with nature.

When we engage the sacred and profound relationship with the natural world, we see opportunities for healing and connection to all things.

Artist Mary Reid Kelley says the knowledge of human history and understanding through experiences and stories coupled with what we can assume our audience will know is of the utmost importance when deciding about complex works designed to share a truth, tale or commentary.

When looking at contemporary Brazilian artist Ernesto Neto whose installations are filling the rooms of the contemporary art scene, we see another example of the power of experience. Neto began working in the 90's in Sao Paulo, Brazil. Primarily working in drawing and fabric installations, he is now working with stretchy linear materials. He crochets them into large vessel like forms and fills them with tactile and pungent materials. Using sound, smell, color and texture to captivate his audience, he invites us to enter into and interact with the giant forms and created spaces. He indeed engages his viewers and brings them fully present into the moment, holding their attention, keeping them aware and responsive. Neto is an artist who seems to understand the phenomenological ideas of consciousness and experience. He creates the opportunity for full embodiment in his massive works of interactive art addressing the gestalt of life itself and the plethora of ways we as a human family engage the worlds we enter. Neto calls forth the sacred from our collective memories of family, ceremony, and ritual.

My own work lives somewhere between environmental and installation art. I create environments so that one must approach, or enter by choice. By giving my viewer choice, I am offering a different kind of experience. As if a portal has been set before them and they must choose to go, to embark upon the journey. When a person is in

choice, when their mind is curious and open it allows a more authentic experience to occur. When one is choosing to go into the unknown they are open to something happening more slowly, more fully. I remind my audience we are one with nature. I remind them that we are all in great need of interacting with our natural world in order to be a whole, balanced and healthy self.



Figure E

I activate the senses by altering the space. The smell of sage and palo santo waft through the air while candlelight casts shadows on the floor and walls. Separated by sand

and handmade paper luminaries the path winds around into itself towards the center. The darkness of the room requires viewers to circumambulate slowly and carefully. The path continues out of the center in another direction creating a double spiral. The slow pace, lighting, smells and echo of breath keep the audience curious, alert and in the present time.

I believe the universe and all life forms are part of a greater whole. The human brains need to identify is set aside, thus one can more fully embody all that the art has to offer. By releasing the minds need to understand and identify we can fully experience the sensations in our bodies. The decentering of human knowledge collectively and individually will allow us a more authentic life experience. Through intentional curiosity we can learn to just feel.

Have you been in the forest and heard the sound of a tree creaking in the wind or the water spilling over rocks and not immediately knowing what it is? That is the feeling of the unknown. If we can move into that more deeply, without trying to identify it but just seeking the experience for what it is, the sounds, the vibrations, the sensations it creates, it is a portal to a more fully and authentic living experience. This is what I bring to the gallery, to the people who come to see my work: a reminder of our unity with the natural world, an opportunity to step out of their own realities and enter into the world of the unknown.



Figure F

Near the end of my thesis work I took my newest pieces out into the forest and other natural settings to explore their relationship with their natural habitat. Through this process I discovered a whole new way of interacting with my work. Out of the gallery and off the walls my work was much more alive and possessed. As if their true spirits could reveal themselves. Here they are fully integrated into the space, the environment. This experience further affirmed for me that my paper works are an extension of myself. The natural embeddings represent all of the natural world I so desperately crave, I am the paper and the ways in which the paper and natural materials are relating, intertwined, wrapped, or holding on speak so beautifully of my relationship with the natural world but more intimately of my relationship with my people, my need for feelings of security, comfort, and connection. My deep yearning for Koininia.

Koininia~

*An active and reciprocal relationship with the Divine
through communion with others.*



Figure G



Figure H



Figure I

Image List

Figure A.

Protected - Teasel Seedpod, handmade flax paper, thread, flower blossom.
2"x2"x3", 2020

Figure B.

Security - Handmade cotton and abaca paper, cattail leaves, eucalyptus, plant fragments, daylily leaves, pigment. 40"x28", 2019

Figure C.

Ca.- detail
Cb.- detail

Thy Comforter - Queen Anne's Lace plants, daylily leaves, handmade Abaca paper-
48"x36" ea., 2019

Figure D.

Flying Thing - Handmade paper, wood, leather, bone. 14"x20"x2", 2018

Figure E.

Labyrinth – Handmade paper, sand, glass, candles, sage and palo santo smoke.
Installation: 30'x 30', 2019

Figure F.

Skin like Bark like Thin Skin - Handmade Abaca and Alabama Kozo paper, dried plants. 60"x 12", 2020

Figure G.

My Horizon Line - Handmade Abaca Paper with corn hair. 60"x 6", 2020

Figure H

My Horizon Line - Handmade Abaca Paper with corn hair. 60"x 6", 2020

Figure I

Ready - Handmade Abaca and Flax fibers, sunflower stalks, plant fragments-98"x20",
2020.

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